# The Straw God Debate: Why ‘For and Against’ Arguments Often Miss the Point

There is a tendency to treat conceptual refutations of God as settling ontological questions. I argue that both atheist and theist arguments often rely on simplified or inherited conceptions, and that philosophical criticism should be directed at the strongest available formulations rather than conceptual proxies.

A straw man fallacy occurs when one side of an argument constructs a simplified or distorted version of their opponent’s position in order to defeat it more easily. In many cases, critiques are directed at what might be called a *Straw God*: not a straw man deliberately invented by critics, but a simplified and anthropomorphic conception that has emerged historically

within religious traditions themselves. Strictly speaking, this is not a straw man fallacy, since the concept under examination is not being misrepresented. Nevertheless, it functions in a similar way. A narrow, anthropomorphic image is dismantled, and its failure is taken to settle the ontological question, as though reality itself were exhausted by that conceptual frame. In this limited sense, it is a straw being, even if not a textbook case of the fallacy.

In order to engage more deeply with this question, we can refine the specifics of the concept we are debating. For the atheist philosopher, this means directing criticism at the most logically rigorous conception of God available, a kind of '*Steel God*', such that if it is refuted, it is refuted on the strongest possible terms. For the theistic philosopher, it means allowing reason and evidence to shape the conception of God, rather than using reason to defend the existence of a God already assumed to have certain characteristics.

## The Riddle of Perfection: Why Concepts Fall Short

In Western philosophy this debate occurs largely in the context of Abrahamic monotheistic traditions. It typically proceeds by accepting or refining a concept of God and then investigating whether this concept has existence. The quick answer is no, it does not. The created concept has no existence outside of the thought in which it takes place. The longer answer is that this, in itself, neither refutes nor confirms the existence of God at the level of ontology. Conceptual analysis and ontological reality are not the same thing. A similar error sometimes also appears in debates about moral realism and in philosophy of mind, where for example limits in conceptual models of consciousness can sometimes be mistaken for limits in consciousness itself.

It is in theology though where this problem is most apparent, precisely because what is being conceptually reduced would not only be dynamic, complex, and multifunctional, but would also be perfect, infinite, and

limitless. This means that when we are talking about God, we are not exactly talking about God. We are necessarily talking about a picture of God, a rough approximation of what God would be like if they were assumed to exist.

If you bring to mind an idea of what "God" means, you will likely see this straight away. You have certain words, benevolence and omnipotence, immanent and transcendent, for example, which function as placeholders. They are not real and graspable ideas, but words that point in a particular direction. We can feel and understand their inadequacy simply by thinking about them.

In imagining the nature of God therefore, we are inevitably creating a small and fleeting two dimensional image that can be held within the confines of an idea. However complex that thought may be, it could never hope to capture what words such as "infinite" and "perfect" would really mean. If God exists, then that existence would be multi-dimensional instead, and the picture we form would be little more than a snapshot of that reality.

This is embraced with clarity in Islam for example, with the recognition that the ninety nine names of Allah are incomplete, and that any attempt to recreate God conceptually is a misunderstanding. What we are left with is the straw God, an imagined picture of a transcendental being that would inescapably be more than any concept.

It is a form of anthropomorphism, a projection endowed with human characteristics. The father figure of scripture has personal goals, likes and dislikes, and character traits, just like us. The "Omni-God" of philosophers has logical contradictions, omnipotence paradoxes, and difficulties knowing what time it is at any given moment, due to being transcendent and eternal. Both are operating as if the concept is the same as the reality.

This indicates precisely where the concept of God could be 'steel-manned' so to speak. God is often conceptualised as a supreme person: a being with a psychology, a location, and a set of human-like motivations, differing from us only in degree of power and knowledge. Once God is defined in this way, the atheist quite rightly points out the logical and empirical difficulties that follow. If God is a person situated within the timeline of the universe, we are compelled to ask where he is, why he does not intervene in specific and measurable ways, or how a single consciousness could process infinite information. Paradoxes such as the stone he cannot lift arise naturally within this frame. By accepting it, the theist is pushed into a defensive posture, attempting to justify the behaviour of a cosmic monarch rather than questioning whether this personal model is philosophically adequate in the first place.

Anthropomorphism is often presented as a way of refuting God's existence. That is not what I am doing here. I am not claiming that God does not exist by using the term. I am identifying the more limited point that we try to understand perfection in imperfect ways, and that in doing so we construct a projection which may or may not bear similarities to the reality beyond it. Neither side of the debate is immune from this conceptual error.

The point here is not that we ought to abandon all God-concepts, and resign ourselves to unknowability, or to insulate the concept of God from rational evaluation. The point is to question whether the concepts we are discussing are operationally sufficient for a meaningful debate, whether they are a close enough approximation to the thing under analysis. This might mean making our concepts a little larger, or giving them more breathing space. One way of doing so would be to incorporate other perspectives, such as the unified and monist ways of thinking found in eastern traditions and in various forms of pantheism.

In doing so, we could recognise that any concept of God, translated so as to fit comfortably inside the human mind, would likely contain contradictions

that the actual God, if one were to exist, would not necessarily possess, because much of the information would be lost in translation. I think this would go some way towards dissolving the usual incoherence arguments and would allow us to focus on the more significant ones. It would also allow us to recognise that advancing this debate may not depend upon more sophisticated forms of argument, but upon a more refined understanding of what the concept of God should mean to a philosopher rather than to a believer.

The caricature of God as an elderly man with a beard who lives up in the sky watching over everyone is an unsophisticated view of God, not likely to be held by very many people. Instead, thoughtful and intelligent theists would be more informed, but may still include assumptions that are not philosophically justified, assumptions about agency, intervention, relatability, and intentions received via scripture. A more philosophically sophisticated concept of God would not include even these anthropomorphic notions. It may even reflect the rational likelihood that a perfect God would be non-dualistic in every sense, and therefore not governed by human distinctions such as good and evil.

## Methodology and Conceptual Accuracy

Since philosophy often progresses by refining concepts, and not by appealing to narrative, authority, or revelation, its task is not to preserve inherited images, but to clarify the kinds of entities, principles, or structures that could or are likely to exist. Scriptural accounts therefore should not function as philosophical data. They are historical, psychological, and sociological artefacts, shaped by particular cultures, moral aims, and imaginative frameworks. When they are treated as inputs to philosophical ontology, the result is not depth but confusion, since narrative meaning and metaphysical explanation operate according to different standards.

This tendency is not merely hypothetical, but can be seen at various points in the history of philosophy. René Descartes, in what is widely regarded as his weakest argument, suggests that God must be actively sustaining his existence from moment to moment, thereby preserving a personal and providential conception of God. Gottfried Leibniz applied his vast intellect to rejecting Baruch Spinoza's monism of absolute necessity, not because he found the reasoning incoherent, but because such a view left no room for a God who intervenes in the world, or stands in a personal relationship to human beings. In each case, rational argument is constrained by the prior demand that God remain a suitable object of worship, petition, and moral governance.

Spinoza, on the other hand, offered an explicitly philosophical rather than scriptural analysis. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he argues that scripture functions as a moral and political instrument, not as a source of metaphysical knowledge, and should therefore be excluded from ontological enquiry. His conception of God is not arrived at by retaining aspects of theology, but by reconstructing the concept from first principles, resulting in an abstract, non anthropomorphic account of reality. His monist God bears so little resemblance to the theological one that he was often branded an atheist, but it is arguably the most logically coherent one, and the one most immune to charges of contradictions and paradoxes.

If we accept Spinoza's challenge to prioritise philosophical consistency over scriptural narrative, the familiar shape of debates about God begins to shift. Standard arguments and objections, from the cosmological argument to the problem of evil, look different once they are no longer directed at an implicitly personal or anthropomorphic conception of God. In the next part of this series, I will attempt a 'Steel God' analysis to see the extent to which they retain their force.

**Author's Note:** *This essay is part of an ongoing project exploring the intersections of perception, metaphysical realism, and moral philosophy, drawing from both Western rationalism and the philosophical traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism.*

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